DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 109 720 CS 501 090

AUTHOR Thomas, David A.
TITLE The Persuasion of Image Building and Presidential Campaigns.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science--Southwest and Rocky Mountain Division (Los Alamos, New Mexico, April 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Elections; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; Political Attitudes; *Political Influences; Political Issues; Television Research; *Voting
IDENTIFIERS *Presidential Campaign

ABSTRACT

In a presidential election campaign, any dimension of an image is important if it motivates the voters to favor or disfavor a candidate. Therefore, to study what motivates electoral behavior is one way to study the persuasion of image building in presidential campaigns. In this paper some of the research in presidential election campaigns is described, and some of the current thinking about electoral behavior is synthesized. The two aspects of presidential campaigns most closely analyzed are the effect of partisan loyalty and the influence of television on the behavior patterns of voters. Some of the questions raised and some of the areas for further research are described in the paper's conclusion. (RB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED109720

"The Persuasion of Image Building and Presidential Campaigns"

by

David A. Thomas, Ph. D.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
David A. Thomas

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Presented to the Social Science Division of the American Association for the Advancement of Science - Southwest and Rocky Mountain Division, 1975, Los Alamos, New Mexico.

(Mr. Thomas is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication, Department of Speech Communication, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.)

CS 501090

The Persuasion of Image Building and Presidential Campaigns

INTRODUCTION

Image building denotes a persuasive process whereby political candidates attempt to convince the electorate to vote for them. While it may connote television advertising which emphasizes a candidate's virtues (or conjures them out of thin air), there is no clear, accepted definition of image building in the literature. It is safe to say that "image" consists of many factors revelant to the voter's perception of a candidate. Kjeldahl and his associates did a factor analysis of presidential candidate images and determined that the two main dimensions ~~that the two main dimensions~~ of an image are "genuineness" and "leadership," (Kjeldahl, et. al., 1971, p. 129), but this hardly clarifies the meaning of the term in a campaign. Some authors suggest that image is based upon personality attributes, previous public record, group affiliations, and stance on the issues (Hahn & Gonchar, 1972; Kelley; 1969). Presumably, an important aspect of a candidate's image is his party affiliation, as Governor George Wallace believes.

In a presidential election campaign, any dimension of an image is important if it motivates the voters to favor or disfavor a candidate. Therefore, to study what motivates electoral behavior is one way to study the persuasion of image building in presidential campaigns.

What motivates voters to vote for one candidate for President instead of another? A definitive answer to this question is not possible, since the electoral process is so complex. The scope of the question, however, has not discouraged students of persuasion from trying to find out. There has been no shortage of books and articles dealing with the topic. Lynda Kaid's 1974 bibliography of entries relevant to the communication process as it operates in a political campaign or similar context in the United States from 1950 through 1972 lists 1539 citations. At the present time, the Speech Communication Association is sponsoring a coordinated study of the 1976 presidential campaign which will involve dozens of scholars representing both the historical-critical and the behavioral approaches to research.

While each election year may be considered unique in many of the factors which are related to voting decisions (incumbency, personal attributes, socio-economic and political conditions during the period of the campaign, strategies and tactics used by the candidates, even the weather on Election Day), scholarly attention seems to have been concentrated on a relatively small number of such factors, expecially the role of partisanship. Most recently, interest has also emerged in analyzing the influence of the mass communications media in shaping voter perceptions of the candidates.

In this paper, some of the research in presidential election campaigns will be described, and hopefully some of the current thinking about electoral behavior will be synthesized. At the conclusion of this essay, some possible areas for further research will be suggested.

PARTISAN LOYALTY

The conventional wisdom holds that voting behavior may be explained for the most part by party preference. The notion that knowledge of partisan alignments is highly predictive of how the votes will be cast is firmly grounded in the standard voting studies by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Campbell. (The People's Choice, 1944; Voting, 1954; The American Voter, 1960.)

Some second thoughts were generated by Key's posthumously published The Responsible Electorate (1966), whose stated thesis was that "Voters are not fools," since they tend to cast their ballots in accordance with how well the candidates conform with their feelings towards the issues. Thus a challenge was issued to the finding of the 1950's that "the voter's pervasive character was his partisan commitment." That statement may still be true of some voters; it is still a persuasive statement to some contemporary political scientists such as Richard Merelman, who stated in 1970, "Most important, partisan identification is the most fully explanatory of all possible influences on the vote."

Another dissenting view was published in 1972 which had the effect of exploding the old axiomatic belief in the primacy of party. DeVries and Tarrance's The Ticket-Splitter states:

> But in the survey studies that we have conducted or reviewed over the last several elections, the dominance of party identification has evaporated. Today when people are asked how they make up their minds about a candidate, they discuss his general ability, his personality, his ability to handle the job, his stand on the issues, and so on. (pp. 73-74.)

DeVries and Terrance found that in the 1968 presidential election, 45% of self-designated Republicans actually voted a split ticket, as did 47% of self-designated Democrats; but 25% of the self-designated "independents" actually voted a straight party ticket! (p. 51) Prior to the publication of The Ticket-Splitter, the so-called "independent" was seen in the same terms originally used in the standard works of the 1950's: They were thought to be confused, disinterested, indifferent, uninformed, uncommitted, rootless, and politically inactive. (For example, Crespi and Mendelsohn's excellent work, Polls, Television, and the New Politics, 1970, pp. 248-9, and Murray Edelman's essay in Barber's Choosing the President, 1974, hew to this line.) On the other hand, DeVries and Tarrence found that the behavioral ticket-splitter is younger, more suburban, better informed, and more active politically than the typical middle-class voter. (DeVries and Tarrance pp. 61, 67.) This assessment is gaining acceptance among other scholars, such as Erikson and Luttbeg of Florida State University (American Public Opinion, 1973, p. 220).

DeVries and Tarrance attack the methodology of the trailblazing research of the 1950's for relying too heavily upon the self-designation of party identification, and they point to possible reinterpretations of the original data. However, their conclusions are mainly based upon their own data collections in recent election campaigns. They suggest that perhaps voting behavior has actually changed since the 1950's. After all, the original work was done with data collected during the 1940's and '50's (the Elmira and Erie studies), before the introduction of television as an important medium of mass communication. Today's young voters, they say, "are oriented to audio-visual media, principally television, because they are the first generation to grow up in the environment of this media. They view television as a more authoritative news source than print media. They learn most about politics from television." (p. 117)

Therefore, party alignment is far from an automatic predictor of voting behavior in contemporary presidential elections, and the suggestion of media influence upon voting behavior has been offered as an alternative explanation.

TELEVISION IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

Today, 97.1 percent of American homes have television, and viewing time in the average home averages over six hours a day. Television is a direct, major part of all of our lives which we take for granted, a major part of the American environment, including election years.

Presidential candidates have used television as a means of persuasion since 1952. Some of the most memorable campaign events have been television events: Nixon's "Checkers" speech, the Nixon-Kennedy debates, the daisy-petal countdown commercial against Goldwater, and McGovern's 2:00 a.m. acceptance speech, to mention but a few. Despite the relatively recent introduction of television into the techniques of presidential campaigning, for many of us it is as much a part of our model of a campaign as a textbook is a part of our teaching scheme.

As students of persuasion in image building in presidential campaigns, we have been able to describe some of the changes which television has wrought, but we have not been able to establish as clear and systematic theories of television usage as we would like. For example, we have catalogued the ways the candidates have allocated their media time. We know that they used longer campaign speeches on camera when television first became available as a novelty, but they have used other formats since then, including debates, slice-of-life documentaries, telethons, silly pseudo-events for the evening news, and, of course, the ubiquitous spot advertisements. Indeed, there is fair agreement among the scholars on some of the changes in presidential campaigns which may be attributable to the impact of television: more people attend to political campaigns, the nomination procedure has been altered and also candidates are now chosen for their media potential, and campaign costs have been greatly

inflated. The electronic media have added drama and conflict, the actual sight and sound of the candidate, and breathless commentary by the political reporter, right in 97.1 percent of America's living rooms. (Mendelsohn and Crespi, 1970, pp. 297-298; Erikson and Luttbeg, 1974, p. 150; Agranoff, 1972, pp. 257-258.)

What we do not yet know about television in political campaigning is how it influences voter behavior. Television has grown too much, too fast, for our theories to be able to assimilate it into our models of electoral influence. We could grasp Truman's whistlestop campaign, but we do not comprehend the modern selling of the president.

Prior to the 1960 Great Debates, the conventional wisdom held that the media has little direct effect upon voting behavior. However, most scholars agreed that public attitudes were reinforced by the media. Viewers used the psychological processes of selective exposure, attention, and recall in their reception of presidential television campaigning. (Klapper, 1960.) This axiomatic approach seemed to hold firm in the face of the"hypodermic" theory of campaign advertising suggested by McGinniss' The Selling of the President 1968. How can voting behavior be attributed to a candidate's spot advertising when the air waves are saturated during a campaign by spot advertisements for every candidate for every office from the city courthouse to the White House? In fact, when both candidates for president use the professional advertising techniques, including television ads, then no conclusion can be drawn that the electoral outcome resulted from them.

Here again, however, recent research has added a further myth-shattering note to the conventional wisdom. DeVries and Tarrance, the same two challengers, found that for the ticket-splitter (who is, as we recall, more aware, informed, and politically active than the typical middle class voter), television is the most influential medium of political influence and information. A critical distinction must be made: of all sources of information, television news and documentaries carry the greatest influence, but television advertising carries very little influence (less than either brochures or newspaper ads, for example) for these crucial voters. (DeVries and Tarrance, 1972, p. 78.)

In keeping with the Ticket-Splitter's observation that intelligent, active voters are subject to media influence in a campaign, other researchers have reported findings equally heretical to the old faiths. A survey by David Swanson reported that voters seem to attend to television communications by and about both party's candidates without much evidence of selectivity. (Swanson, 1973, p. 139.) And Sidney Kraus, in his concise and cogent summary of the major research in this area during the past two decades, concluded, "Today we have empirical evidence that 'massive and desirable changes in opinions' can occur as a result of media advertancy to the political process." (Kraus, 1974, p. 433.)

If there is a stronger relationship between mass media and the electorate than we formerly believed, we now have a basis for explaining some of the phenomena of current campaigning. For example, the decline of party primacy in voting decisions correlates with the increasing use of television over the past couple of decades. Several researchers have drawn the connection between these two trends, concluding that the mass communications media have supplanted the political parties as the principal means of mediation between the candidates and the voters. (Mendelsohn and Crespi, 1970, pp. 310-311; Agranoff, 1972, pp. 5-18; Dreyer, 1971-1972, p. 553.)

Another important note is that television seems to enhance the credibility of the incumbent President through free access to it throughout his administration. In terms of image, the incumbent shapes the public's perception of what a President is supposed to look like and how he is supposed to act, each time he is seen on the evening news and in his occasional news conferences. Consequently, when election time nears, he fits the public image of the presidency better than any challenger. It is a reasonable assumption that television furnishes an advantage to the incumbent. Who would have imagined, even one year ago, that Gerald Ford would be a viable presential candidate in 1976? Ford was not even mentioned in White's Making of the President 1972. Now, thanks to his round of television speeches as the incumbent, along with regular news coverage, he stands high in the public opinion polls. (David S. Broder has written perceptively about the advantages of the incumbent in several sources; The Party's Over, p. 239, is one.)

Some progress has also been made toward formulating theories of how television operates to influence voter behavior, even though it remains true that no theory explains it clearly enough to make predictions as yet. (1)Dan Nimmo, drawing upon Stephenson's "play theory," suggests that the viewing public sees a political campaign on television as an acted-out fantasy, like a sports competition, with the candidates cast in the roles of heroes and villians, favorites and underdogs. (Nimmo, 1970)(2) Tony Schwartz has proposed a theory of attitudinal resonance, drawn from McLuhan, which suggests that our media usage stems from the principle that many of our life experiences are stored in the human memory as received, rather than as verbal or symbolic translations of those experiences. In American culture particularly, many of our life experiences are literally media experiences in this age of television. As a consequence, television images evoke viewers' memories and attitudes by providing auditory and visual cues which tap them directly and "resonate" with them. In regard to political television, Schwartz said, "The real question in political advertising is how to surround the voter with the proper auditory and visual stimuli to evoke the reaction you want for him, i. e., his voting for a specific candidate." (Schwartz, 1974, pp. 24-25, 92-93.)

Neither of these theories is precise enough to generate testable hypotheses for the research laboratory, although both suggest lines of

analysis which might lead to refinements.

STRATEGIES FOR PERSUADING THE VOTERS

Agranoff has summarized the present task-orientation of campaign planners:

> The specific motivational forces which strategists select and the campaign processes they choose are necessarily a mixture. It is always a matter of the proper mix between candidate, issue, and party factors, and reinforcement, conversion, or activation of latency. (Agranoff, 1972, p. 25.)

This complexity surely exists in presidential campaigning, as the preceding analysis has shown. Agranoff also showed how campaign strategies have changed due to the changing roles of parties and media:

> Foremost in media campaigning is the candidate image, in which the campaign organization stresses human qualities of the candidate and his competence for the job. Electronic media have become the vehicle for candidates to appeal to electorates as party organizations once did. Party organizations were better suited to utilize their manpower or mobilize a pre-existing sentiment, party orientation. Electronic media are better suited to use advertising to manufacture sentiment, candidate and issue orientation. (Agranoff, 1972, pp. 18-19.)

CONCLUSION

This analysis of political campaign persuasion has raised numerous questions for academic analysis:

1. How can we identify, isolate and manipulate the variables involved in a candidates's image?

2. How do partisan factors influence a candidate's media usage?

3. What are the auditory and visual cues which actually comprise a candidate's image on television? (Suggest a content analysis.)

4. What role does the substantive issue position (such as the pocketbook issue, foreign policy, etc.) play in a candidate's image? (Kitchens and Powell, 1975, have suggested discriminant analysis as a method for correlating voter opinions and candidate positions to predict voting behavior.)

5. Have Watergate and its aftermath traumatized the electorate to such an extent as to confound our theories and predictions about future campaigns?

6. What are the ethical ramifications of political image-building upon the candidates, the voters, and the country?

References Cited

Agranoff, Robert (ed.). The New Style in Election Campaigns. Boston: Holbrook Press, Inc., 1972.

Berelson, Bernard, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee. Voting. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954.

Broder, David S. The Party's Over. New York: Harper & Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1972.

Campbell, Angus, and others. The American Voter. New York: Wiley, 1960.

DeVries, Walter, and V. Lance Tarrance. The Ticket-Splitter. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972.

Dreyer, Edward C. "Media Use and Electoral Choices: Some Political Consequences of Information Exposure." Public Opinion Quarterly, 35 (Winter 1971-1972), 544-553.

Edelman, Murray, "The Politics of Persuasion," in James David Barber (ed.). Choosing the President. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974, 149-173.

Erikson, Robert S. and Norman R. Luttbeg. American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content and Impact. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973.

Hahn, Dan F. and Ruth M. Gonchar, "Political Myth: The Image and the Issue," Today's Speech, 20 (Summer 1972), 57-65.

Kaid, Lynda Lee, Keith R. Sanders, and Robert R. Hirsch. Political Campaign Communication: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974.

Kelley, Stanley, Jr. "Campaign Propaganda in Perspective," in Joseph M. Ray (ed.). The President: Rex, Princeps, Imperator. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1969, 59-67.

Key, V. O., Jr. The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960. New York: Vintage Books, 1966.

Kitchens, James T. and James Larry Powell, "Discriminant Analysis as an Instrument for Political Analysis," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 40 (Spring 1975), 313-320.

Kjeldahl, Bill O., Carl W. Carmichael, and Robert J. Mertz, "Factors in a Presidential Candidate's Image," Speech Monographs, 38 (June 1971), 129-131.

Klapper, Joseph T. The Effects of Mass Communication. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960.

Kraus, Sidney, "Mass Communication and the Electoral Process: A Reassessment of Two Decades of Research," Speech Monographs, 41 (November 1974), 427-433.

Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. The People's Choice, 3rd Ed. New York: Harper & Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1965.

McGinnis, Joe. The Selling of the President 1968. New York: Trident Press, 1969.

Mendelsohn, Harold and Irving Crespi. Polls, Television, and The New Politics. Scranton, Pa.: Chandler Publishing Co., 1970.

Merelman, Richard, "Electoral Instability and the American Party System," Journal of Politics, 32 (February 1970), 114-139.

Nimmo, Dan. The Political Persuaders. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Spectrum Books, 1970.

Schwartz, Tony. The Responsive Chord. Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1974.

Swanson, David L., "Political Information, Inference, and Judgment in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (April 1973), 130-142.